

# Dual Elite Recruitment Logic and Political Manipulation under Xi Jinping\*

CHIEN-WEN KOU AND WEN-HSUAN TSAI

*Under Xi Jinping, the cadre recruitment policy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has been adapted. What are the political implications of these adaptations? This paper argues that Xi has sought to consolidate his power among the political elite and strengthen grassroots governance by introducing a new cadre recruitment policy. We propose the concept of “dual elite recruitment logic” as an aid to interpreting the cadre recruitment strategy in the Xi era: the CCP’s system for appointing and promoting cadres at the full provincial/ministerial level (正部級, zhengbuji) and the grassroots follows’ criteria that are different from those formulated under the previous “rejuvenation of cadres” principle. While China under Xi may be able to maintain political stability and promote socio-economic development in the short term, the lack of a new succession mechanism is the biggest obstacle to China’s future political development.*

**KEYWORDS:** Consolidation of power; county party secretaries; dual elite recruitment logic; grassroots governance; rejuvenation of cadres.

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Political development in China seems to show signs of a step backward from the “institutional layering” introduced under Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao (Kou, 2010, pp. 79–91).<sup>1</sup> Many scholars have noticed a tendency toward

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CHIEN-WEN KOU (寇健文) is a Distinguished Professor in the Department of Political Science and the Director of the Institute of International Relations at National Chengchi University. His research interests include Chinese politics and political elites. He can be reached at <cwkou@nccu.edu.tw>.

WEN-HSUAN TSAI (蔡文軒) is a Research Fellow in the Institute of Political Science at Academia Sinica. His research interests include Chinese local governance, Chinese political development, comparative politics, and comparative authoritarian regimes. He can be reached at <whtsai@gate.sinica.edu.tw>.

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<sup>1</sup>In the period of 2000–2012, most scholars believed that China’s political system was going to be institutionalized (Bo, 2004, pp. 70–100; Zang, 2005, pp. 204–217).

autocracy since Xi Jinping assumed office in 2012 (Lee, 2017, pp. 325–336). Xi has disregarded norms set by his predecessors (Minzner, 2018), particularly in elite recruitment (Shirk, 2018, pp. 29–30). How can we better understand the way Xi is strengthening his power and ability to rule through adaptations of the cadre recruitment policy? How do these institutional changes affect Chinese politics? This paper aims to answer these questions.

A great deal of research has been carried out into the CCP's cadre management systems. Some scholars argue that the CCP manages its cadres through characteristics such as the level of education or whether they occupy posts in the party or the government system (Walder, 1995; Zang, 2004). Landry, Lü, and Duan (2018) identify two dimensions of economic performance and political loyalty, and they hold that the CCP has adopted a dual strategy in the management of its cadres. For local cadres who hold lower-level positions, performance in managing the local economy plays a greater role in their advancement in the party. For the recruitment of higher-level cadres, however, political connections and political allegiance become more important (Landry et al., 2018). These scholars have found that the CCP's cadre recruitment is based both on the nature of the jobs they hold and their political performance and connections.

Given the valuable opinions on elite recruitment in the CCP put forward by Landry et al. (2018), we further argue that like his predecessors Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, Xi Jinping prefers to recruit his trustees to important positions. Xi has done so however by disrupting the system and particularly by not complying with age requirements for the appointment and removal of cadres.<sup>2</sup> This has mainly occurred in two situations: when cadres who are too old to qualify for an important position according to the rules are appointed regardless and when cadres are allowed to continue in their posts despite having reached retirement age. These practices have resulted in a rise in the average age of senior officials.

As Landry et al. (2018) suggest, the CCP attaches great importance to the performance of leading cadres in the grassroots government. Compared with previous leaders, Xi Jinping has paid more attention to local governance and the recruitment of grassroots cadres. He has repeatedly emphasized the need to recruit young and talented

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<sup>2</sup>Dictators typically recruit and appoint capable and loyal cadres to key positions. This study places special emphasis on the age factor in discussing the recruitment and appointment of senior cadres because, from the 1980s onwards, cadre rejuvenation has been a significantly critical criterion for personnel changes at all levels of Chinese elite politics. However, Xi Jinping has violated this principle in the recruitment and appointment of senior cadres, and this bears relatively significant political implications. For relevant discussions on how dictators conduct political recruitment and appointment, please refer to Egorov and Sonin (2011).

cadres as a way of strengthening the party's governance at the grassroots level.<sup>3</sup> However, these leading grassroots cadres have often become a “tool” of governance. While they may have been rapidly promoted to county-level leadership positions at a young age, they appear to stay at this level indefinitely. Even if they have the chance of promotion to higher-level posts, such as those at the department level (廳級, *tingji*), they may have ceased to be competitive in terms of age at this point. In other words, there might not be a strong correlation between experience as a grassroots cadre and the chance of promotion to a high-level post later in one's career.

To better capture the above characteristics of the cadre management under Xi Jinping, we propose the concept of “dual elite recruitment logic.” Here, “dual” refers to political elites both at and above the provincial/ministerial level (senior cadres) and those at the grassroots and particularly the county level (縣級, *xianji*). During a speech on governance delivered in 2015, Xi stressed the importance of a “key minority” (關鍵少數, *guanjian shaoshu*) of officials — provincial/ministerial level (省部級, *shengbuji*) leaders and county party secretaries — and the need to keep an eye on their recruitment and appointment to positions (“Xi Jinping Yanzhong,” 2020). The two sets of elites dealt with in this paper — high-level and grassroots officials — are exactly within the scope of this “key minority.” Therefore, the concept of a “key minority” is critical for the study of contemporary CCP political elites.

The research methods used in this paper are as follows. When discussing senior cadres, the main unit of analysis is the provincial/ministerial level official. The figures show that the average age of cadres at this level is indeed increasing under Xi Jinping. This paper also finds that under Xi, senior cadres do not fully abide by the age norms established under Hu Jintao. In other words, there are some cases where cadres who are unqualified in terms of age are promoted and those at the official retirement age do not retire. When discussing grassroots cadres, the main unit of analysis is the county party secretary. Since Xi came to power, many cadres have been appointed to this post while under the age of 40, which was a rare occurrence during the Hu Jintao period. From the 2015 list of “National Outstanding County Party Secretaries” (全國優秀縣委書記, *quanguo youxiu xianwei shuji*), we find that the cadres who received this award did not have age advantages over the others. This indicates that being officially recognized as an outstanding county party secretary does not guarantee

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<sup>3</sup>The quality Xi Jinping values most in grassroots cadres is ability. This does not mean that Xi doesn't value their loyalty, but that he considers grassroots cadres to be less important than senior cadres for the consolidation of his power. In this light, for the recruitment and appointment of grassroots cadres, this paper argues that Xi wishes to promote young and capable cadres to county-level leadership positions to properly handle local governance. We will discuss this topic in the second section.

promotion to a high-level post. This is likely to be the result of the wish of the authorities to see county-level leading cadres contributing to grassroots governance for a comparatively long period of time.

This paper is organized as follows: In Section 2, we discuss the political functions of these two categories of cadres and the adjustments that have been made to the “rejuvenation” principle under Xi Jinping’s leadership, proposing the concept of “dual elite recruitment logic.” In Section 3, we show how Xi has disregarded age norms in the recruitment of high-level cadres and that the average age of high-level cadres is rising. In Section 4, we attempt to discern why Xi is emphasizing the importance of grassroots governance. In Section 5, we explore the function of the county party secretary and argue that for the CCP, grassroots cadres are being used as “tools” for grassroots governance. Cadres with county party secretary work experience are not guaranteed a better chance of promotion to high-level positions. In Section 6, we analyze the political attributes and characteristics of high-level and grassroots-level cadres. We then draw our conclusions.

## **A Concept of Analysis: Dual Elite Recruitment Logic**

In relation to the concept used in our analysis, we will discuss the following three issues. First is the way in which the two categories of elites — senior and grassroots cadres — serve to strengthen political power at the center and the grassroots, respectively. Second is the way in which Xi Jinping has changed the method of recruitment for these two categories of political elites in a bid to achieve his goals of strengthening his personal political power and enhancing local governance. Finally, we conclude that Xi has adjusted the norms governing the rejuvenation of the cadre body according to a “dual elite recruitment logic.”

## **The Political Functions of the Two Categories of Cadres and Xi’s Manipulation**

Provincial/ministerial level cadres and county party secretaries, the “key minority” particularly valued by Xi, are the elites discussed in this paper. These two categories of cadres possess different political attributes and perform different functions.

Promotion to a provincial/ministerial level post indicates that a cadre has entered the inner circle of CCP politics. The paramount leader’s main source of power is the “selectorate,” composed mainly of members of the CCP Central Committee, the

majority of whom are cadres at or above the provincial/ministerial level (Shirk, 1993, pp. 86–87). In other words, cadres appointed to posts at the provincial/ministerial and above are very likely to participate in the nomination or recommendation process for party leaders and thereby influence the appointment of the next general secretary of the CCP.

Cadres at or above the provincial level are required to have an “overall viewpoint” on political work. Professional qualifications are not the party center’s major concern when it is promoting cadres to these positions. It is more a matter of their “comprehensive qualities” (綜合素質, *zonghe suzhi*), including their overall viewpoint (全局觀, *quanjuguan*). Under Xi, a “sense of alignment” (看齊意識, *kanqi yishi*) — that is, whether their attitude is aligned with Xi’s own — is highly valued as part of their “comprehensive qualities” (Lin, 2020).

In order for high-level and grassroots cadres to fulfill their respective functions as outlined above, Xi Jinping has manipulated cadre recruitment rules. His current obsession with consolidating his political power may have its roots in the Cultural Revolution period when he was a target of “political struggle” (Lee, 2018, pp. 473–497; Torigian, 2018, pp. 7–15). Xi’s other goal is to “modernize the national governance system and governance capabilities.” This may explain his enthusiasm for grassroots governance, which exceeds that of his predecessors Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao. Xi’s pursuit of these two goals has caused him to change the policy of “rejuvenating” the regime’s cadres that has gradually evolved since Jiang Zemin’s time in office (Kou, 2010, pp. 269–309). The current criteria for selecting senior and grassroots cadres differ from those of the past.

When appointing cadres to full provincial/ministerial level posts, Xi pays particular attention to political loyalty, since that is essential for the consolidation of his power (Wang & Zeng, 2016, pp. 470–481). A large number of Xi’s confidants have been recruited to positions at this level. Xi’s excessive emphasis on political loyalty has resulted in many cadres nearing retirement age either remaining in office or being promoted. Rejuvenation has been halted and the principle of age limits for promotion is no longer being adhered to.

County-level leading cadres, on the other hand, function differently. They are in charge of grassroots governance and situated far from the political power struggles of the CCP central leadership. In grassroots governance, county-level leaders have more discretionary power than provincial or prefecture-level city leaders. Governments above the county level are usually involved in laying down more abstract guiding principles which county-level governments have to follow when they are devising detailed policies suited to local needs (Fan, 2008, p. 10; Heberer & Schubert, 2012, pp. 228–231).

Xi also wants to create a new cohort of grassroots cadres to strengthen local governance. To accelerate the promotion of grassroots cadres, several measures for “exceptional promotions” (破格提拔, *pogē tībā*) have been adopted. “Exceptional promotion” refers to promotions within two years of appointment to a post (Hu, 2020). One common practice is the “selected and transferred graduate” (選調生, *xuandiaosheng*) system under which local governments sign contracts with universities to select talented graduates on an annual basis for posts in grassroots governments. This system came into operation in 1986. *Xuandiaosheng* usually start their careers in section-level posts handling important tasks such as poverty alleviation and economic development. For grassroots cadres, serving as *xuandiaosheng* is a fast track to promotion. *Xuandiaosheng* take a relatively shorter time to be promoted from section-level to county-level positions compared to other civil servants. Although the *xuandiaosheng* system was not established during the Xi Jinping era, Xi encouraged local governments to increase the number of *xuandiaosheng* serving as public officials through the assistance of Chen Xi (陳希), Head of the CCP Central Organization Department and a close confidant of Xi. Through this *xuandiaosheng* mechanism, Xi promoted a large number of outstanding and young cadres to serve in county-level leadership positions (Xiao, 2012). This has been a critical promotion avenue for grassroots cadres during the Xi era that enables them to advance to county-level positions at relatively younger ages. The CCP has recruited a large number of university graduates since Xi came to power to work at the grassroots level through such channels (Tsai & Liao, 2019).

Under Xi Jinping, detailed regulations have been formulated governing the “exceptional promotion” 破格提拔 of grassroots cadres.<sup>4</sup> The aim is to cultivate a cohort of talented cadres to strengthen grassroots governance. In 2014, the CCP revised the “Regulations on the Selection and Appointment of Leading Cadres of the Party and Government” (黨政領導幹部選拔任用工作條例, *dangzheng lingdao ganbu xuanba renyong gongzuo tiaoli*, hereafter referred to as “the Regulations”) (“Zhonggong Zhongyang Yinfa,” 2019). Standards for “exceptional promotions” are mentioned in Article 9 of the 2014 version. These specify that cadres who accomplish important tasks can be swiftly promoted or even leapfrog over people above them:

[Cadres] who can withstand the test, have outstanding performance, and make great contributions at critical moments or when they are undertaking urgent and risky tasks; those with outstanding work performance in regions or units with difficult conditions, in complex

<sup>4</sup>Some other “exceptional promotion” methods have been adopted, such as that of “college graduate village officials” (大學生村官, *daxuesheng cunquan*) (He & Wang, 2017) who occupy temporary positions (掛職, *guazhi*) (Tsai & Liao, 2020, pp. 52–55).

environments or in backward areas; and those who work earnestly and dutifully in their positions, and whose work performance is particularly remarkable.

## Rejuvenation of Cadres Revisited

In the above discussion, we have attempted to clarify the logic of the cadre recruitment under Xi Jinping. The relevant policies introduced after Xi took office have indeed brought about major changes in the operation of Chinese politics (Brødsgaard, 2018; Doyon, 2018). To achieve his goals — namely, the consolidation of his political power and the strengthening of grassroots governance — Xi has changed the promotion criteria for both senior and grassroots cadres. The pace of rejuvenation has been slowed for cadres at or above the full provincial/ministerial level, and by ignoring the rules on terms of office, Xi has sought to consolidate his power by promoting his confidants. For grassroots cadres (particularly county party secretaries), he has mandated the selection and promotion of young and talented officials and subjected them to rigorous exposure and training. This dual elite recruitment logic for cadres under Xi Jinping is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1.

*Dual Elite Recruitment Logic under Xi Jinping*

	Priority Goals	
	Consolidating power among the political elite	Strengthening grassroots governance
Landry et al.'s suggestions	Political allegiance prioritized in the recruitment of high-ranking cadres	Administrative ability prioritized in the recruitment of grassroots cadres
Supplementary point of view argued by the authors	To senior cadres, Xi disregards age norms to promote his associates; Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao had basically adhered to age norms to promote their associates	To grassroots cadres, Xi Jinping strengthened the use of “exceptional promotions” to appoint young cadres as county party secretaries seen as “tools” for governance and not necessarily intended for further promotions

*Notes:* Compiled by the author based on Landry et al. (2018).

Xi Jinping prioritizes political allegiance when recruiting cadres to provincial/ministerial level posts, and in doing this he has to some extent disregarded age norms. As a result, the process of rejuvenation at this level has slowed and a large number of cadres from Xi's faction have been appointed. Through these practices, Xi aims to consolidate his power among the political elite. Concerning the system for recruiting county-level elites (this paper mainly investigates the appointment of county party secretaries, 縣委書記, *xianwei shuji*), the CCP aims to promote and train more competent young cadres (Schubert & Ahlers, 2012, pp. 67–86). In contrast to the situation under Hu Jintao, some cadres born since 1980 (the post-80s generation who were under 40 years of age in 2020) have been appointed to county party secretary posts. However, these young cadres are probably being used as “tools” by Xi. They are useful for improving governance at the grassroots but they are likely to remain in county-level leadership posts for a very long time without being offered promotions to provincial-level posts.

This dual elite recruitment logic on the one hand reflects the CCP's recent perception that “rejuvenationism” (唯年輕化, *weinianqinghua*) for senior cadres has gone too far, and on the other hand, Xi's desire to carry out “modernization of the national governance system and governance capabilities” (國家治理體系與治理能力現代化, *guojia zhili tixi yu zhili nengli xiandaihua*) (Xia, 2019). To consolidate his position in the Party central and ensure the continuation of his political line, Xi has promoted cadres to full provincial/ministerial level posts chiefly on the basis of their political loyalty. In other words, “rejuvenation” is no longer the sole criterion for selecting cadres for senior positions. At the grassroots level, however, Xi recognizes the necessity of training up a cohort of young, vigorous cadres capable of reinforcing the CCP's hold on local governance and responding to the demands of the society (Oi, Babiarz, Zhang, Luo, & Rozelle, 2012, pp. 649–675). This will enhance the legitimacy of the Xi regime and enable him to achieve his goal of continuing in power.

### **Disregarding Age Limits and the Rising Average Age of High-Ranking Officials**

The main political function of high-ranking officials is to consolidate the power of the paramount leader. This has prompted paramount leaders throughout the history of the CCP regime to reserve provincial/ministerial level posts for their associates. Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and Xi Jinping have all appointed trusted political cronies to



key positions in the leadership, although they differ in their degree of adherence to age limit norms. There are two age limits: the mandatory retirement age and the age at which a cadre becomes ineligible for further promotions.<sup>5</sup> When cadres reach their mandatory retirement age, they are expected to either retire or be transferred to “second-front” posts. Both of these age limits originate from Deng Xiaoping’s reform of the cadre system in the early 1980s which involved the abolition of life tenure for leading posts (廢除領導幹部終身制, *feichu lingdao ganbu zhongshenzhi*) and the promotion of “more revolutionary, younger, better educated, and more professionally competent” (革命化, 年輕化, 知識化, 專業化, *geminghua, nianqinghua, zhishihua, zhuananyehua*) cadres. This system developed and became customary under Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao.

Jiang and Hu promoted their close associates — members of the Shanghai clique in Jiang’s case and cadres with a Youth League background in Hu’s — to leading posts, but they did so in line with the above-mentioned age limits. In contrast, Xi Jinping is prepared to disregard these age limits, and the limits have lost their binding force for this reason. We examined records of 268 civilian cadres with the CCP membership who were holding full ministerial or deputy state leader positions in central or provincial party organs or governments between November 2012 and October 2020. We found that 13 of these were in breach of the mandatory retirement age and 40 had been promoted in violation of the age limit for promotion (see Table 2). There have been more cases of the violation of age limits since Xi came to power than there were under Hu Jintao. For example, Wang Qishan (王岐山, born July 1948) retired from the CCP Politburo Standing Committee in October 2017 but was elected as the vice president of the PRC in March 2018. He would have been expected to retire at the age of 68.

Under Xi Jinping, there have been 10 cases of cadres remaining in a provincial/ministerial post beyond the mandatory retirement age of 65. Late in 2019, Luo Huining (駱惠寧, born October 1954) was appointed as the deputy head of the Finance and Economic Affairs Committee of the National People’s Congress, having previously been the party secretary of the Shanxi province. This is a typical personnel arrangement for newly retired cadres of full ministerial rank. However, his appointment as the director of the Liaison Office of the Central People’s Government in Hong Kong in January 2020 violates the age limit of 65 years. He Yiting (何毅亭, born 1952) continued to serve as the executive vice president of the CCP Central Party

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<sup>5</sup>For a discussion of changes in age limits since the 1980s, see Kou (2010, pp. 138–140, 188–191, 194–196, 271–273). For more discussion of the age at which cadres become ineligible for promotion, see Kou and Tsai (2014, pp. 156–157).

Table 2.

*Retirement and Promotion Age Limits for CCP Cadres and Violations of Those Limits, November 2012–October 2020*

Position/rank	Age of ineligibility for promotion	Violation cases*	Mandatory retirement age	Violation cases*
State Leader (正國, <i>zhengguo</i> )				
Deputy State Leader (副國, <i>fuguo</i> )	n/a	n/a	68**	1 (0, 1)
Minister (正部, <i>zhengbu</i> )	64	0	65	10 (0, 10)
Deputy Minister (副部, <i>fubu</i> )	58	41 (6, 35)	60	2 (0, 2)

*Notes:* \*A case is defined as a violation if the cadre is promoted 12 months after reaching the age of ineligibility for promotion or remains in power 12 months after reaching the mandatory retirement age. The first number within the parentheses in the violation cases' cell represents the number of violations during the Hu era, while the second number refers to cases during the Xi era.

\*\*A leader should no longer seek re-election after the age of 68, although they can remain in office until the end of their term.

*Source:* Kou (2012). Cases were calculated and tabulated by the authors.

School until December 2020 despite being over 65. No executive presidents of the Central Party School violated this rule while Hu Jintao was in power.<sup>6</sup> In another example, Chen Hao (陳豪, born February 1954) retired as the party secretary of the Yunnan province in November 2020 when he was approaching the age of 67.

The mandatory retirement age for cadres at the deputy provincial/ministerial level is 60. However, Lin Duo (林鐸, born March 1956) advanced to full ministerial rank as the party secretary of the Gansu province at the age of 61 in March 2017 after having previously held a deputy ministerial rank. Liu Kun (劉昆, born December 1956) retired as the deputy minister of finance in December 2016 at the age of 60 and was transferred to the National People's Congress. In March 2018, however, he came out of retirement to take up a front-line position as the minister of finance.

The rules on age limits for promotion have been significantly weakened since Xi Jinping came to power. For example, Fu Zhenghua (傅政華, born March 1955) was promoted to full ministerial rank in March 2015 as the executive deputy head of the Ministry of Public Security. Yu Weiguo (于偉國, born October 1955) was appointed governor of the Fujian province in January 2016, his first full ministerial-level post. These promotions all violate the age limit of 58 years for cadres at the deputy

<sup>6</sup>Yu Yunyao (虞雲耀) and Li Jingtian (李景田) both retired at age 65. Su Rong (蘇榮) left the post and became the party secretary of the Jiangxi province before he was 65 years old.

ministerial level. Other close associates of Xi Jinping have also been promoted in violation of the age limits, including Cai Qi (蔡奇), Liu He (劉鶴), Liu Cigui (劉賜貴), Wang Xiaohong (王小洪), Yang Xiaodu (楊曉渡), and Ying Yong (應勇).

The average age of full ministerial-level cadres has also risen under Xi Jinping compared to his predecessors. We have examined the age distribution of full provincial/ministerial level cadres (including leaders of provincial party committees, provincial governments, and the State Council) at the beginning of their terms of office over the past two decades. There are a total of 363 cases (see Table 3). Another 42 individuals are excluded from the analysis because they concurrently held a deputy state leader-level post. For example, Beijing party secretaries are also members of the CCP Politburo. Their mandatory retirement age is 68 rather than 65, so they are older on average than their full provincial/ministerial level colleagues.

The ages in these 363 cases averaged at 58.2 in 2003, 57.9 in 2008, 59.0 in 2013 and 59.8 in 2018. This means that ranking cadres in the Hu era could remain in service for seven years on average after advancing to full ministerial rank, whereas they served for an average of five to six years under Xi Jinping. Two additional findings reveal an increase in the average age of ranking cadres. The number of cases in the age range of 61–65 steadily increased from 2003 to 2018 while those in the age range of 56–60 decreased from the Hu era to the Xi era. The number of cases under 55 years of age also decreased under Xi Jinping. These findings are displayed in Table 3.

Table 3.

*The Aging of Full Ministerial-Level Cadres from the Hu Era to the Xi Era*

Year	Age Range						Cases	Average	Minimum	Maximum
	41–45	46–50	51–55	56–60	61–65	66–70				
2003	2	6	8	54	26	0	94	58.2	46.3	64
2008	0	2	19	37	32	0	92	57.9	44.8	64
2013	0	6	10	42	35	1	90	59.0	46.1	67.4
2018	0	1	12	29	44	1	87	59.8	49.1	65.5

*Notes:* \*The ranking cadres under analysis are provincial party secretaries, governors, and leading officials of full ministerial rank in the General Office of the State Council, constituent departments of the State Council (國務院組成部門, *guowuyuan zucheng bumen*), special organizations directly under the State Council (國務院直屬特設機構, *guowuyuan zhishu teshe jigou*), organizations directly under the State Council (國務院直屬機構, *guowuyuan zhishu jigou*), and the administrative offices of the State Council (國務院辦事機構, *guowuyuan banshi jigou*).

\*\*The data were accessed on August 1, 2003, 2008, 2013, and 2018. Forty individuals have been counted two or three times in different age ranges due to the length of their terms of office.

*Source:* Kou (2012). The cases were calculated and tabulated by the authors.

## Xi Jinping's Personal Experience and the Importance He Attaches to the Selection of Grassroots Cadres

Another level of leadership discussed in this paper consists of grassroots cadres whose political function lies mainly in the local governance. Here we pay particular attention to the recruitment of county party secretaries. Xi Jinping has emphasized the importance of governance at the county level, something that may be attributable to his early experience as an official in the Ding County, Hebei (河北定縣, *Hebei Dingxian*) in the 1980s. A decade later, Xi penned an article on the importance of county party secretaries in which he wrote the following:

I once served as a county party secretary, and whenever I talked with my colleagues, we always complained in much the same way: our ranks were not high, but neither were our responsibilities small. If the country is compared to a net, then the three thousand or so counties are like the knots (紐結, *niujie*) in this net. Once the “knots” get loose, political unrest will occur in the country; if the “knots” are strong and reliable, the political situation will be stable. No state decrees and ordinances would fail to be thoroughly implemented through the counties. Therefore, in view of the relationship between the whole and the part, the rise or fall, and the safety or danger, of the country depends on whether work at the county-level is good or bad. (Study Group, 2015, p. 64)

An article on the People's Net website also underlines the importance that Xi Jinping attaches to the functions of the county party secretary (“Anhui Shengwei Fushuji,” 2015). Jiao Yulu (焦裕錄) is one such party secretary who served in the Henan province in the 1960s. He has been held up by Xi Jinping as a model (Zhongguo Gongqingtuan, 2016). Xi has been quoted as saying, “to serve as a county party secretary, one has to be a Jiao Yulu-style county party secretary.” Xi launched a movement to learn from Jiao Yulu in 2014, and he is convinced that the experience a cadre gains while serving as a county party secretary forms the cornerstone of his/her career. Xi is opposed to party and government leaders rising to power through the Communist Youth League. In 2016, he issued regulations stipulating that Youth League cadres must have “a clear orientation of not ‘becoming an official.’” Xi has therefore limited the role of the League, making it refocus on youth work so that it will never again serve as a springboard for career advancement.<sup>7</sup> Instead, cadres aspiring to rise through the ranks should first hone their governing skills through work as county party secretaries.

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<sup>7</sup>Before Xi Jinping came to power, Communist Youth League cadres had to be transferred to party and government departments before they reached a certain age. As a result, when League cadres were transferred, they were usually younger than non-League cadres of the same level.

The Central Party School organized a series of “county party secretary workshops” (縣委書記研修班, *xianwei shuji yanxiuban*) in 2014, and by the end of 2017, every county party secretary in the country had attended this two-month course taught by heads of central government departments and commissions as well as by regular lecturers. One compulsory set text was *Xi Jinping on the Governance of China* (習近平談治國理政, *xi jinping tan zhiuguo lizheng*), and Xi personally delivered an address at every graduation ceremony (Chu, 2015). One interviewee reported that Xi tried to make the acquaintance of as many outstanding county party secretaries as possible so that he would know who should be later promoted (“Anhui Shengwei Fushuji,” 2015).

Xi also values national awards for outstanding county party secretaries. These awards were introduced by the Central Organization Department in 1995, although they lapsed after the first year. Xi revived them in 2015 when around one hundred outstanding county party secretaries were commended. Since then, he has presented the awards in person each year. In his speech at the 2015 award ceremony, Xi said that “peace will descend on the country when the prefectures and counties are in order” (郡縣治, 天下安, *junxian zhi, tianxia an*) and that “county party committees are the ‘first-line of command’ (線指揮部, *yixian zhihuibu*) of our party in governing and

Table 4.

*County Party Secretaries in Their 30s under Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping*

Cadre	Leader	
	Hu Jintao	Xi Jinping
Name, year of appointment, age	Dong Yuyi, 2012, 31	Yang Zunfeng, 2012, 32; Zhang Hui, 2013, 33; Zhou Senfeng, 2013, 33; Zhou Mi, 2014, 32; Li Teng, 2014, 32; Liu Kai, 2015, 32; Jin Li, 2015, 35; Wang Xiwei, 2016, 35; Yao Ning, 2019, 34; Zheng Shao, 2019, 39; Qiu Ling, 2019, 37; Su Jianjun, 2019, 38; Huang Xiuhang, 2020, 39; Ma Ju, 2020, 39; He Yefang, 2020, 34; Li Ming, 2020, 38; Hu Haiyang, 2020, 39; Hanxu, 2020, 38
Number	1	18

*Source:* This information was obtained by the authors using the two search engines of Google and Baidu.

rejuvenating our country, and county party secretaries are the ‘first-line commanders-in-chief’ (“Xi Jinping: Junxian Zhi,” 2015).

There are presently several cadres who were born after 1980 (80 後, *ba ling hou*) serving as county party secretaries. There were fewer cadres in their thirties holding similar positions under Hu Jintao (Tsai & Liao, 2019, pp. 951–954) or under Jiang Zemin (see Table 4).

It is reasonable to expect that there are even more cadres either in their 30s or younger still who presently serve as county governors or township leading cadres. Due to a lack of data, we cannot precisely conclude that the average age of county-level leading cadres has been lower under Xi Jinping than it was when Hu Jintao was the CCP General Secretary. What can be said with certainty is that more county party secretaries in their 30s have been singled out as model cadres in the Xi era, and this has encouraged regional governments to actively recruit younger cadres as county-level leaders (Zhang, 2016).

### County Party Secretaries: “Tools” for Use in Governing the Grassroots?

While the CCP’s emphasis on grassroots governance under Xi Jinping has encouraged the appointment of younger cadres to positions as county party secretaries, we argue that these cadres are not necessarily being promoted to higher-ranking posts. In short, the CCP is treating them as “tools” for grassroots governance. As mentioned above, Xi Jinping has underlined their importance with the example of Jiao Yulu, a county party secretary from the 1960s. He has, however, asked cadres to “focus on your contribution to the people instead of pursuing high-ranking posts” (“Xi Jinping: Buqiu,” 2020). In other words, he expects county party secretaries to dedicate themselves to grassroots governance instead of using their county posts as a springboard for promotion.

Cadres named as “National Outstanding County Party Secretaries” tend to be older than expected (see Table 5). No cadres in their 30s received the award in 2015; the average age is 50.21. Twenty-seven of the recipients were in their 40s, including Zhang Xiaoqiang (張曉強, 40), Meng Lingxing (孟令興, 41), Chen Junlin (陳俊林, 41, whereabouts uncertain), Zhang Xia (張霞, 42, female and an ethnic minority), Ji Jianjun (吉建軍, 43), Zhang Dingcheng (張定成, 43), Hu Qisheng (胡啟生, 44), Ren Houming (任厚明, 44), Yang Fasen (楊發森, 44), Chen Xingjia (陳行甲, 44, who later transferred to the private sector), Lin Hongyu (林紅玉, 45), Li Junxia (李君霞,

Table 5.  
Data on Recipients of the “National Outstanding County Party Secretaries” Award (2015)

Content	Rank in 2020				Other
	County level	Deputy department level	Department level	Deputy provincial/ministerial level	
Number of people	4	62	16	9	Suspended: 8 Deceased: 1 Transferred to the private sector: 1 Whereabouts uncertain: 1
The average age in 2015				50.21	

Source: The list can be found on “Zhonggong Zhongyang Zuzhibu” (2020). The recent developments are based on the author’s verification with Google and Baidu.

45), Liao Guisheng (廖桂生, 45), Xiong Zhengyu (熊征宇, 45), Wang Xiaojiang (王晓江, 46), Sun Juxian (孙巨先, 46), Sun Jingmin (孙京民, 47), Liao Junbo (廖俊波, 47, later deceased), Zeng Yu (曾瑜, 47, female), Wang Hongbin (王洪斌, 48), Zheng Guangquan (郑光泉, 48), Nan Pei (南培, 48 and an ethnic minority), Li Jianfeng (李建峰, 49), Liu Xianwei (刘先伟, 49), Zhou Xin (周新, 49), Jiang Gang (蒋刚, 49), and Feng Zhendong (冯振东, 49, suspended from duty for corruption).

Of the recipients of the award, nine now hold deputy ministerial-level posts. They are however relatively old, with one being 63, one 60, two 59, one 58, two 57, one 56, and one 55. Indeed, the recipients tended to be older than several other young deputy provincial/ministerial level cadres in 2020, such as the vice chair of the Tibet Autonomous Region, Ren Wei (43); the vice governor of the Jiangxi province, Wu Hao (48); the vice chair of the Government of the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, Lai Jiao (48); the vice governor of the Zhejiang province, Liu Xiaotao (50); or Zhou Hongbo of the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region (50). The youngest award recipient in 2015, Zhang Xiaoqiang (now 45), is the department-level party secretary of Shantou. He was not competitive in terms of age compared to other young department-level cadres in 2020 such as the general manager of the Lu’an Company, Liu Junyi (39), or the party secretary of the Henan Province Communist Youth League, Wang Yi (40, female).

Judging from the above, we suggest that the CCP uses county party secretaries as “tools” for governing the grassroots and does not necessarily consider them as candidates for high-ranking posts. While may have been fast-tracked into county party

secretary posts, their subsequent careers have generally slowed or even stagnated, indicating that the CCP plans to keep these cadres in low-level posts for the long term.

Another example of a county party secretary whose career has stalled is Zhou Senfeng (周森鋒), a selected and transferred graduate (“Dangzheng Lingdao Ganbu,” 2019) who was appointed to a deputy division-level leading cadre post at 28, promoted to the division head level at 29, and had become a district party secretary (equivalent to a county party secretary) by the age of 33. As of 2020, Zhou (40 years old) had been at the county party secretary level for six years. This is further proof that the CCP wants this group of cadres to continue in grassroots governance. As they are younger, they have the ability to remain in their posts until they achieve results. What is of greater importance is that these cadres may not be candidates for leading positions at or above the ministerial level. In particular, they are unlikely to be seen as future political successors (H. He, 2015, pp. 36–38).

## Conclusion

Xi Jinping is trying to consolidate his power among senior cadres and strengthen grassroots governance using a new cadre recruitment policy shaped by dual elite recruitment logic. He has slowed down the rejuvenation of the leadership at or above the full provincial/ministerial level, interrupting the terms of office of cadres to prevent high-level ones from developing power bases and threatening his authority. In this way, Xi will be able to extend his term as the general secretary beyond the 20th Party Congress; and in an effort to strengthen grassroots governance, he has overseen the selection and promotion of young and vigorous cadres to serve as grassroots leaders, particularly county party secretaries. However, it has been observed that while many county party secretaries were under 40 when they were appointed, they are unlikely to achieve a swift promotion to positions such as the division head or bureau director. This seems to indicate that Xi wishes to keep them at the grassroots to solve local social and economic problems. Will these selected and transferred graduates be promoted to higher positions in the future? It is difficult to answer this question as Xi’s cadre recruitment system only began less than a decade ago, and more time must be devoted to observing its future development.

Xi Jinping’s adoption of a dual elite recruitment logic may largely be explained by his determination to modernize China’s governance system during his term of office. One factor influencing Xi’s decision to dispense with the previous recruitment system has been his reluctance to make arrangements for a successor by allowing other



leaders to share some of his power as his predecessors Hu Jintao and Jiang Zemin did. Some authorities hold that dictators seek to gain support from their colleagues by sharing power (Magaloni, 2008, pp. 715–741). However, this theory has been challenged in the present-day China. Xi intends to extend his rule beyond the 20th Party Congress and purge any cadres who oppose him, thus treading a winner-takes-all path.

What, then, are China's political prospects? At least in the short run, the regime is likely to exhibit the characteristics of authoritarian resilience (Nathan, 2003, pp. 6–17; Shambaugh, 2008). However, if there arise serious unforeseen problems such as a threat to Xi's life or a deterioration in his health, the lack of an appointed successor may spark an intense power struggle at the top. Even if grassroots-level cadres perform exceptionally well, the overall political situation in China will still be seriously impacted if the central leadership is destabilized. As Xi appears to have dispensed with the conventions and regulations governing political succession so that he can concentrate power in his own hands, his greatest mistake has perhaps been his failure to institutionalize any new procedures for succession.

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